

STRUCTURE AND IDENTITY OF THE EUROPEAN AND THE MEDITERRANEAN SPACE: CYPRIOT STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract - *The purpose of the present study was firstly to describe how university students in a teacher education program perceive the structure of the European Union region as well as of three Mediterranean sub-regions (European, African, Asian) and secondly to examine students' attitude towards Mediterranean people. The data for the study were collected through a self-developed questionnaire from freshman, sophomore and junior students. Students' responses to 17 statements relative to the features of the above regions were factor analyzed through a principal components analysis. The results indicated that the European Union region was defined by three factors (Economic and Political Affairs, Cultural Production, Geomorphology) while each of the three Mediterranean sub-regions was defined by four factors (Economic and Political Affairs, Peoples' Mental States, Geomorphology, Cultural Production). Concerning students' attitude towards Mediterranean people it emerged that the respondents were more positive towards European Mediterranean people than towards people coming from the remaining two Mediterranean regions. When the comparison referred to African and Asian Mediterranean, the analysis favored African Mediterranean people.*

Introduction

The signing of the Treaty of Rome by the first six member-states of the then European Common Market and the extensively publicised statement that the ambition was to create a people's Europe extending from the Atlantic ocean to the Ural mountains signaled people's hope for development, prosperity, and common understanding. Joining the European Union became a national objective for a number of countries. As a result, the six-member European Common Market developed into a fifteen-member European Union (EU) with member states scattered all over Europe. The slogan 'unity in diversity' became the ideal, giving substance to cooperation, initially for economic and vocational reasons and, more recently, for political, cultural and educational issues.

After three decades of struggle for a unified Europe, one is tempted to ask 'what has been the outcome?'. Did the idea of a European entity materialise? Is

it possible for somebody to identify certain features which turn the European Union into a region with its own structure and identity? Do those features appear to be valid for European sub-regions as well? The present investigation was launched to answer the above question.

The study relates to two streams of thought: a) how are regions conceptualised and b) what is the essence of the European dimension in education? One interpretation of how regions are conceptualised has been proposed recently by the Maltese sociologist Ronald Sultana (1996, 1998). Sultana looks at regions as 'constructs' rather than as facts. A region may be historically and culturally disparate and still be considered a region because people have 'constructed' it in their minds as such. Sultana (1996, 1998) uses the example of Europe, pointing out that although disparate on a number of criteria (political, cultural, economic), Europe is viewed by quite a few people as a region. According, then, to this line of thinking, a region is constructed and possibly constructed differently by different people. Sultana (1996) puts it this way: 'Behind these varied constructions lie important ideological, political and economic considerations ... In other words, a 'region' should not be considered in a reified manner; it can become one, or fail to become one as a result of vested interests by those doing the naming' (p.v.).

The purpose of the present investigation is exactly this: to describe how university students of Cyprus in a teacher education program perceive the structuring of the European and the Mediterranean space. Does each of the two regions have its identity formulated by a given set of characteristics and, if that is the case, which are those characteristics and how are they formulated in students' minds?

The European dimension in education, the second stream of thought of the present study, is one of the directives of the EU for its member-states; it is not a school subject but rather a set of experiences which aim at enabling young people to operate comfortably in Europe. Tulasiewicz and Brock (1994) point out that the European dimension in education relates to cognitive enrichment (knowledge about Europe), skill development and affective disposition (living and working with other European people). To what extent has the European dimension in education influenced the understanding and behavior of university students with respect to common understanding and living together in a united Europe? A second purpose of the study is to answer the above question.

In summary form, then, the present investigation purports to answer the following two questions: How do students in a teacher education program at the University of Cyprus perceive the unique features and identity of the European Union and the Mediterranean regions? How does this same group of respondents view people from three Mediterranean sub-regions?

Since the study refers to the perceptions of Greek Cypriot students, it is important that we present a brief sketch of the recent history of the island; such a reference to the history of the island may prove useful in interpreting the outcomes of the study.

Cyprus remained under the Turkish rule for the period 1570-1878. In 1878 the island was sold to the British who controlled the island until 1960. During both the above periods the Greek national ideal prevailed as a supreme value among Greek-Cypriots. The policy and aspirations of the Greek community were defined according to national visions. The most important of those visions was unification with Greece.

The island gained its independence in 1960. The constitution which accompanied the independence provided for separate municipal administration and educational and religious institutions for the two main communities - Greeks and Turks - of the island. As a result, in the years which followed and until the Turkish invasion in 1974, both the Greek and the Turkish school systems adopted an education whose primary objective was to strengthen ethnic conscience.

In 1990, Cyprus applied to become a member of the European Union.

Methodology

The research was launched as a comparative study between the University of Athens and the University of Cyprus. All freshman, sophomore and junior students majoring in education at the two institutions were the subjects of the study. The students were asked to complete a questionnaire developed by the authors and their colleagues (Elias Matsaggouras and John Roussakis) from Athens University. However, the present investigation is based only on the data obtained from the Cyprus sub-population.

Population and sample

The population of the present study consisted of all 1995-96 freshman, sophomore and junior Greek Cypriot students in a teacher education program at the University of Cyprus (N=477). In terms of age, the population was a homogeneous group with ages ranging between 18 and 21 years. The gender distribution of the population favored female students.

All the members of the population were included in the sample. The response to the questionnaire amounted to 70.8% (N=338 usable questionnaires). A goodness of fit test indicated that the sample was representative of its population.

Instrumentation

The study was of an exploratory nature, based on an *ex post facto* research design. A specifically developed questionnaire was administered to all the members of the sample during the last two weeks of April 1996. The questionnaire required students to provide personal data as well as to decide whether each of seventeen statements was a decisive factor in defining the following four regions: the European Union (EU) region (consisting of its fifteen member-states) and three Mediterranean sub-regions, namely European Mediterranean (EM) (i.e. Greece, Italy, Spain), African Mediterranean (AFM) (i.e. Libya, Algeria, Morocco) and Asian Mediterranean (i.e. Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel). The assessment was made separately for each region using a five-point interval scale (0= not at all valid to 4=valid to a very great extent).

The respondents were also asked to use a semantic differential scale in order to describe their feelings of the people coming from the above three Mediterranean sub-regions, using 10 criteria. To examine further student's feelings for the people coming from the above regions, the subjects were asked to state whether they were positive, neutral or negative for them assuming that they found themselves in the following four life situations: sharing the same table for lunch, living in the same neighborhood, sharing the same room, being married to someone; a separate assessment was made for each life situation.

Data analysis

The study was based on both descriptive and inferential statistics. Students' responses to the 17 statements relative to the unique features of each of the above four regions were factor analysed in order to identify students' perception of the unique features and the identity of each region. Thus, a separate factor analysis was performed for each region. The purpose of conducting factor analysis was to group the items around major factors and thus identify the region's major features. The criterion for this grouping was each item's unique loading on a certain factor. For a clear picture of the structures of each region, the factors identified were rotated to the varimax criterion.

To decide the extent to which each factor identified through factor analysis was present for the region, mean scale scores were computed for those factors whose alpha reliability scale coefficient was relatively high (i.e. beyond .65) by adding each student's response to the items loading heavily on each factor and dividing by the number of items. To study students' perceptions of people coming from the three Mediterranean sub-regions, the mean value for each bipolar

variable was plotted graphically. Differences among the means for each region on each variable were tested for statistical significance using paired t-tests. To assess students' views of the people coming from the three Mediterranean sub-regions, the percentage ratio representing positive attitude for each life situation was used.

Results

Structure and identity of the European and the Mediterranean space

The first research question dealt with students' perception of the unique features of the European Union region as well as of the three Mediterranean sub-regions. To identify those features, four principal components factor analyses were performed, one for each region, using seventeen items covering various aspects of the region. The factor solution for each region appears in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that the factor analysis produced three factors for the EU region and four factors for each Mediterranean sub-region. Based on the content of the items which loaded heavily on each factor, four titles were suggested in order to capture the content of each factor. In essence, the four factors can be looked at as dimensions alongside which one may describe the unique features of each region. The titles proposed were: Economic and Political Affairs, Cultural Production, Geomorphology, and Mental States.

The first factor was labeled 'Economic and Political Affairs' (EPA) because it consisted of items having to do with the economy of the region (e.g. per capita income, extent of industrialisation) as well as with its politics (e.g. current political affairs, state governance, organization and administration, history of the region). Six items, with an alpha reliability coefficient $\leq .80$, loaded uniquely and heavily on this factor.

The second factor was named 'Cultural Production' (CUP) since it was defined mainly by items which referred to various forms of artistic production and expression (e.g. literature production, music tradition, esthetic production). Three items loaded heavily on this factor; its alpha reliability coefficient was $\leq .70$.

The third factor - 'Geomorphology' (GEO) - originated from items which referred to the physical characteristics of the region; it included items such as physical geography, climate conditions, flora and fauna, and geographic location; it consisted of four items and its alpha reliability coefficient was $\leq .65$.

The last factor was labeled 'Mental States' (MST); it was defined by four items which have to do with the way of everyday living (e.g. the way people live together, the way of approaching everyday problems). The alpha reliability coefficient for the factor was $\leq .67$.

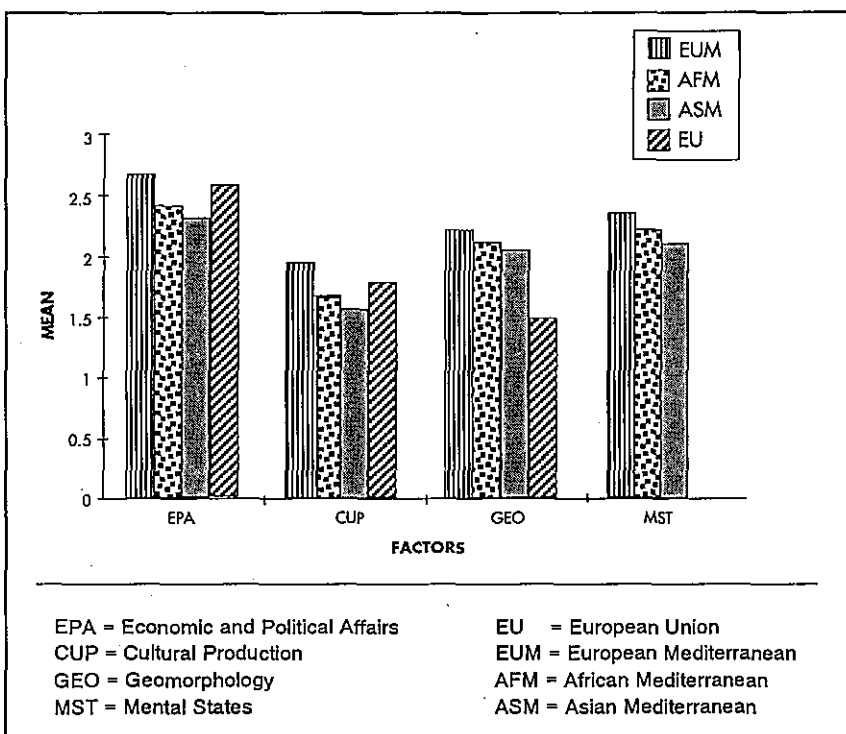
TABLE 1: Students' perception of the European Union region as well as of three Mediterranean subregions according to the results of factor analyses

Factor	European Union region	Mediterranean regions		
		European Mediter.	African Mediter.	Asian Mediter.
Economic and Political Affairs				
Current political affairs	.81	.80	.77	.82
Organization and administration system	.70	.80	.65	.81
State governance	.81	.73	.76	.74
Extent of industrialization	.81	.72	.75	.73
History of the region	—	.60	.49	.64
Per capita income	.73	.60	.62	.51
Mean scale value	2.59	2.69	2.41	2.32
Standard deviation	.96	.82	.78	.87
Alpha reliability scale	.85	.82	.80	.84
Variance explained	16.20	31.90	28.30	31.00
<i>Cultural production</i>				
Literature production	.85	.85	.80	.83
Esthetic production	.84	.81	.83	.84
Music tradition	.73	.75	.62	.64
Mean scale value	1.78	1.95	1.67	1.57
Standard deviation	.92	.95	.85	.91
Alpha reliability scale	.85	.82	.70	.77
Variance explained	34.90	16.30	8.10	16.20
<i>Geomorphology</i>				
Physical geography	.70	.81	.82	.74
Climate conditions	.78	.80	.80	.83
Geographic location	.69	.70	.61	.60
Flora and Fauna	.60	.54	.69	.64
Mean scale value	1.49	2.22	2.13	2.05
Standard deviation	.92	.93	.83	.80
Alpha reliability scale	.65	.75	.76	.71
Variance explained	8.10	7.70	15.60	9.30
<i>Mental States</i>				
People's mentality	—	.76	.84	.85
The way people live together	—	.75	.77	.76
Way of approaching everyday problems	—	.51	.53	.57
Mean scale value	—	2.35	2.22	2.08
Standard deviation	—	.84	.83	.88
Alpha reliability scale	—	.67	.72	.75
Variance explained	—	7.40	7.30	6.60
Total variance explained	59.20	63.30	59.30	63.00

Table 1 also shows that while the European Union region was defined by three factors – Economic and Political Affairs, Cultural Production, and Geomorphology – the Mediterranean sub-regions were defined by all four factors. The three factors which defined the European Union region explained together 59.2% of the total variance. The four factors which defined the three Mediterranean sub-regions explained together a total variance which ranged between 59.3 - 63.3%.

It is also important to examine the extent to which each region was defined by each factor. As Table 1 shows, the mean scale values ranged between 1.49 (i.e. *almost valid*, when considering the assessment scale used) and 2.59 (*almost valid to a great extent*). The mean scale scores for each factor were graphically depicted in Figure 1. It is immediately apparent from Figure 1 that the subjects of the study thought that the most important feature of the European Union

FIGURE 1: Students' perception of the European Union space as well as of three Mediterranean subregions



region is the economic and political relationships among the member states. This feature was thought by the respondents to be present to a *considerable extent* (the mean scale value was 2,59).

It is also worthy to note that all three Mediterranean sub-regions were thought to be defined by the same factors and in the same rank order. Three features of each region appeared to be present to a considerable extent; in rank order, these were: the economic and political affairs that prevail in the countries which comprise the region, people's mental states and their way of everyday living, and the geomorphology of the region. The fourth feature – cultural production – was *present to some extent*.

Student perceptions of the Mediterranean people

The second research question referred to the way students view people coming from three Mediterranean sub-regions. Figure 2 presents the profile of people coming from three Mediterranean areas, as perceived by the subjects of the study on the basis of ten criteria. These three profiles indicate that the students who participated in the study view more positively, on all ten criteria included in Figure 2, people coming from the European Mediterranean region than people coming from the other two regions. When the comparison concerns African Mediterranean and Asian Mediterranean, the respondents of the study appeared to be more positive towards African than for Asian people. When the differences among the three regions on each variable were tested through paired t-comparisons, they turned out to be in all cases except one statistically significant (t values ranging between 2,89-13,32, d.f.=between 211-230, $p < \text{between } .001-.004$).

Figure 3 shows students' attitude towards people coming from the above three Mediterranean sub-regions when faced with the following four life situations: sharing the same table for lunch, living in the same neighborhood, sharing the same room, getting married to someone. The information presented in Figure 3 warrants two major observations. Firstly, students are more positive towards people coming from the European Mediterranean region than the African and the Asian Mediterranean regions. Secondly, when considering the above four life situations the percent of students looking positively at people from other areas diminishes as the relationship becomes more intimate; while 84% (4 out of 5 students) appeared ready, for example, to share the same table for lunch with somebody from the European Mediterranean region, only 40% (2 out of 5 students) were ready to get married to someone from this same region. This trend appears present in the case of the other two areas as well.

FIGURE 2: Students' vision of people coming from various Mediterranean subregions

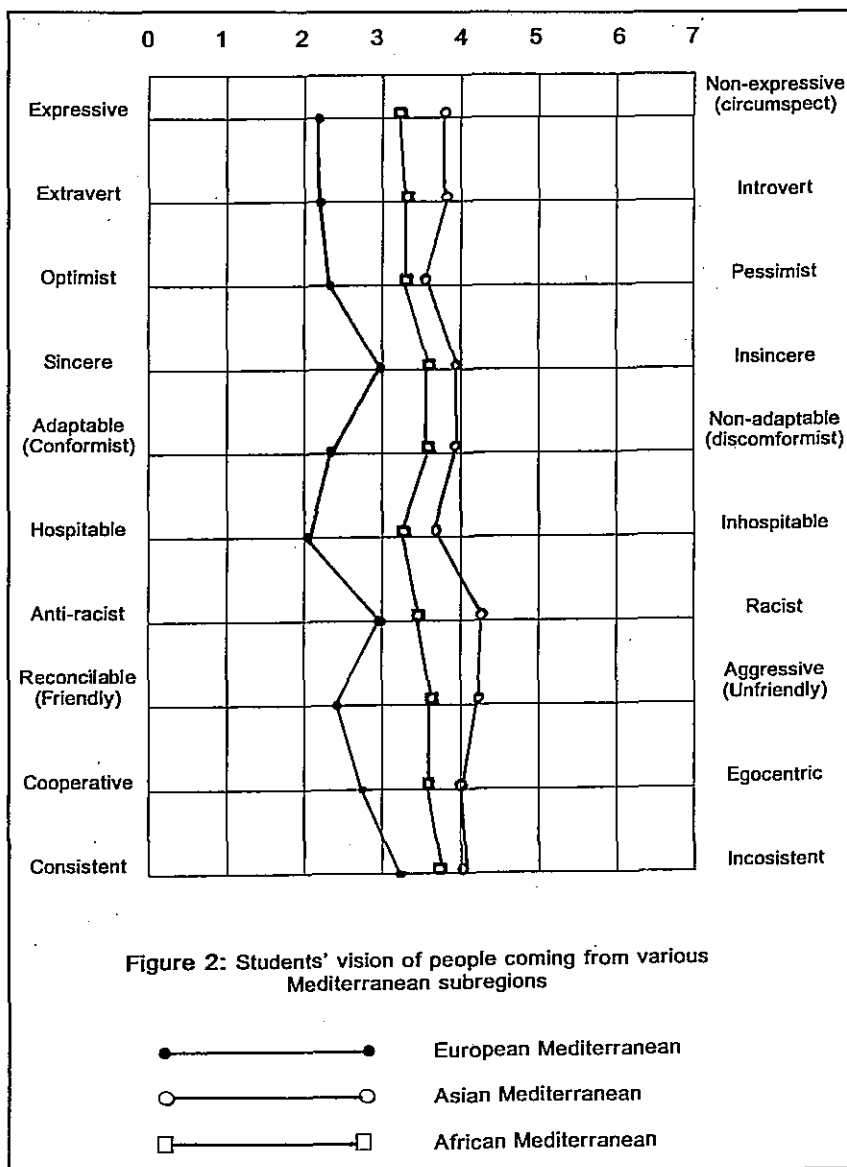
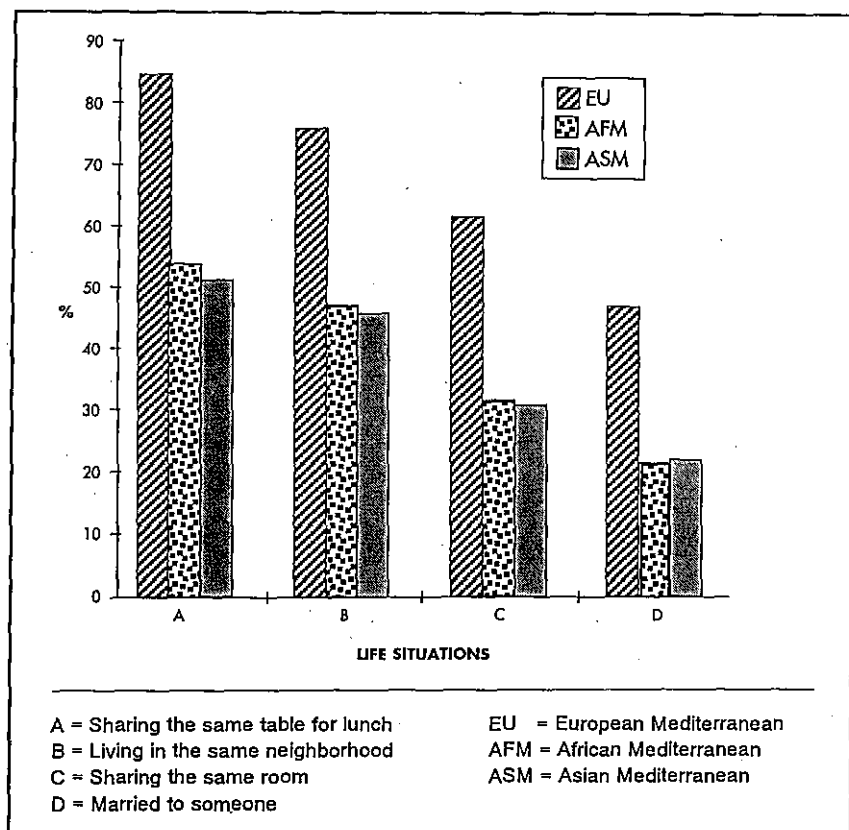


FIGURE 3: Percentage of students who view positively people from three Mediterranean regions relative to four life situations



Discussion

The purpose of the present study was firstly to find out how students perceive the structuring of the European and the Mediterranean space and secondly to examine student's vision of the Mediterranean people. Based on the outcomes of the statistical analysis, it appears that while the European Union is principally defined by the economic and political relationships which prevail among its member states, the three Mediterranean sub-regions are uniformly defined firstly by the economic and political relationships among its member states, secondly by people's approach to their everyday problems of living, and thirdly

by the geomorphology of the region. With respect to students' vision of Mediterranean people, it became clear that students were more sympathetic towards European Mediterraneans than towards African and Asian Mediterraneans. Given these outcomes, five major observations appear warranted.

The first observation relates to the way students develop the concept of region. The outcomes of the study indicate, firstly, that regions are 'constructed' in people's mind and, secondly, that they are constructed on the basis of diverse criteria. The students who participated in the present study, for example, view the European Union region mainly defined by economic and political criteria. When coming to the three Mediterranean sub-regions (European, African, Asian), however, these same students consider equally important to the economic and political criterion additional ones such as the way people think and act in their everyday life, and the geomorphology of the region. Students, therefore, consider multiple criteria and perceive regions as sociopolitical systems rather than as regional contexts based on state territories and physical boundaries. In the case of the European Union, economic and political benefits become the defining characteristics of the region. In the case of the three Mediterranean sub-regions, beyond economics and politics, commonality of culture, the way of everyday living and geomorphology become also defining characteristics of the region. The above conclusion is also supported by the students' response to a specifically designed question in the context of the present study; when asked to decide in which region Cyprus belongs, two out of every three students stated that they adopted multiple criteria when taking that decision. Regions, then are viewed by the respondents of the present study not as physical boundaries but as rational entities which come together because of various reasons. Such an assertion is congruent with Pasiás's (1995) argument according to which the decisive units for region theorisation are not countries but political and economic entities which cut across national boundaries. This idea is also endorsed by Todeschini (1996) who suggests that '[regions] can refer to a segment of a national territory but could also refer to an area which goes beyond state boundaries, including segments belonging to different states' (p. 125). It has to be noted, then, that the outcomes of the present study support Sultana's (1996) theorisation about regions outlined in the introduction of the present study. To distinguish between north and south Mediterranean countries, Sultana adopts not physical boundaries but developmental indicators such as rate of development and illiteracy rates. It can be concluded, therefore, that in people's mind 'a region is constructed and possibly constructed differently by different individuals' (Sultana, 1996, p.v.), a position echoed very much in Todeschini's (1996) statement:

'Which criteria should one adopt in order to define a regional area? It is quite obvious that there is not a single criterion, or even a single set of criteria that can be privileged over others, even if the multiplicity of criteria might possibly lead us to an organic synthesis of sorts. Could language define a region? Most certainly. Could areas that have shared more or less lengthy periods of common history be defined as regions? Again, certainly. And what about areas that are homogeneous in terms of their geographical and physical relief? Climatic areas, continents, maritime-oceanic zones could be considered to have a regional identity. Why not? It is not difficult, however, to see that the different criteria outlined above influence each other in a reciprocal and interactive manner, in such a way that culture and language evoke the criterion of history, evokes economy, and economy evokes geography' (p. 125).

The second major observation concerns the specific criteria adopted by students in defining the above four regions. The outcomes of the study present no surprise as to which criteria are used by students to define each region. The economic criterion, for example, has always been an important variable in developing the concept of modern Europe, an assertion succinctly expressed by Kazamias (1995) through his statement 'the economic sector has always been considered the steam engine of European unification' (p. 563). Additionally, the geomorphology criterion has been adopted in certain cases in defining regions. Braudel (1992) has argued that climate alone exercises a unifying influence on an area that has a social and geographical referent. To use his own words:

'The Mediterranean climate, stretching as it does from the north limit of the olive tree to the northern limit of the palm tree, exercises a unifying influence ... the same vegetation, the same colors and, when the geological architecture recurs, the same landscapes, identical to the point of obsession; in short, the same ways of life' (p. 172, 178).

The third observation relates to the absence of certain criteria when defining certain regions. The fact that the factor 'Mental States' is not present in students' mind as a defining criterion of the European Union space deserves attention; it suggests that despite the so often and widely publicised idea for a European dimension in education, there is still much to be worked out in developing a European mentality in students' mind. It is expected that the implementation of a

curriculum which serves the European dimension of education will promote pluralism, social sensitivity, tolerance, respect for cultural diversity and integration. Markou (1995), Kassotakis (1995), Kassotakis and Rousakis (1995) and Pasiás (1995) have stressed that schooling remains a socialising agent with the purpose of realising the above objectives. Markou (1995) points out that the school should be reconstructed so that a sensitivity develops for cultural diversity. Pasiás (1995) adds that students should be helped to understand the new prospects and possibilities of the European state of affairs. For this to happen there is need for a curriculum which serves multi-culturalism in education. Currently such a curriculum is not present. A study parallel to this one which involved content analysis of social studies textbooks indicated that the information included in them for various European countries is very often stereotyped and presented in a subjective way.

The fourth observation refers to students' vision of 'the other'. The results of the present study show that students have their own prejudices against people coming from the three Mediterranean sub-regions; on the one hand they are more positive for European Mediterranean people than for those coming from the remaining two sub-regions (African, Asian); on the other hand they appear to be less positive with life situations which rely on intimate relationships. Three arguments at least can be put forward to interpret the above outcomes. Firstly, the subjects of the study consider themselves mostly Europeans. When responding to a question with three alternatives (European, African, Asiatic) in the context of the present study, 94.6% of the respondents stated that they consider themselves Europeans. In fact, one may posit that the positive attitude towards European people (see Figure 2) may reflect students' projected self-image. Secondly, the respondents of the study are Greek Cypriots and their historic and affective ties with Greece turn Europe more familiar to them since Greece is part of Europe both ideologically and geographically. Thirdly, the unresolved Cyprus problem and the continuing Turkish occupation of 39% of the island's territory may render the Asian Mediterranean, to which Turkey belongs, less attractive for students. The historical background outlined in the introductory section of the study is very relevant to this discussion.

Finally, it has to be pointed out that the study has important implications for teacher education. The respondents of the study are candidates for the teaching profession. Yet the study uncovered some of their prejudices for other European and Mediterranean people. Assuming that the objective is to create a European citizen who is open to other points of view, who aspires to the notion of equality and who is sensitive to the cultures of diverse nationalities and to people coming from different regions, then the teacher education curriculum, both the explicitly stated and the hidden one, should be such that cultivate the above values. The

teacher education curriculum should, in effect, be consistent with the European dimension of education and thus promote cognitive enrichment (i.e. knowledge about Europe and its people) as well as skill development and affective disposition towards living in multicultural societies. To this effect foreign language literacy, student exchange programs and knowledge of cultures should be an integral part of the teacher education curriculum.

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